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ABSTRACT

The Absent Student Assistance Program (ASAP) began as a collaboration between the one Houston (Texas) precinct and two middle schools to reduce unexcused absences. By 1996-97, the program had expanded to a second precinct and additional middle and high schools. Program implementation in Precinct 7 was evaluated for the 1996-97 school year. Schools provided precinct deputies with a list of absent students daily, and deputies then visited the students' homes in the evening to discuss the absence with student and parents and to plan needed assistance. The overall attendance rate in precinct schools went from 91% before the program to 93.6% in 1996-97. Deputies provided many additional services for the schools including an increased police presence at or near the schools. All four principals responding to the survey thought that the program improved attendance, and because the schools became eligible for state funds for improved attendance, the program generated funds above its costs. Recommendations for program improvement include better student address information and more home visits. (Contains 2 tables and 10 references.) (SLD)

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RESEARCH

Report on an Educational Program
Department of Research and Accountability

Absent Student Assistance Program Precinct 7 1996-97

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ABSENT STUDENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM PRECINCT 7 1996-97

Program Description

The Absent Student Assistance Program (ASAP) began in 1993-94 as a partnership between Harris County Precinct 6 Constable Victor Treviño and Jackson and Marshall Middle Schools to reduce unexcused absences. In 1994-95, the program was expanded to six additional middle schools (Deady, Edison, Fleming, Hartman, McReynolds, and E.O. Smith) in Precinct 6. In addition, there was a change in the program from being strictly volunteer on the Constable's part to having nine positions funded by the Houston Independent School District (HISD), with a paid deputy assigned to each of the eight schools and a sergeant who oversaw the entire program. In spring, 1995, the ASAP program was expanded to two middle schools in Precinct 7, Attucks and Thomas. Then, in fall 1995, four additional middle schools in Precinct 7 were added: Cullen, Dowling, Ryan, and Woodson. By 1996-97, ASAP in Precinct 6 was also in four high schools: Austin, Davis, Milby, and Wheatley. The Precinct 6 program included a sergeant, nine deputies, and a clerk. The Precinct 7 program included a sergeant, six deputies, and a clerk. This evaluation shall focus on the program in Precinct 7; the Precinct 6 program was evaluated in 1994-95.

The schools provided the deputies with lists of absent students and their addresses daily. The deputies then visited the homes that evening, with the homes of Friday's absentees visited on the following Monday along with the Monday absentees (officers worked a half-day Friday consisting primarily of patrolling the neighborhood around the schools and catching up on paperwork). For each student, the deputy informed the parent(s)/guardian(s) of the absence, determined the type of absence (excused, questionable, social services needed, no one at home, or bad address), and assisted the family as appropriate. The type of absence was provided to the school in the conference the following school day when that day's absences were reported to the deputy. If

reasons for the absence were determined in the deputy's visit to the home, these were also provided to the school. Follow-ups were the school's responsibility. There appeared to be an agreement in place by the end of school on the reporting of the constable visits. In addition to the daily oral report to the school, a weekly written report to the school, a monthly report to the Department of Student Retention Initiatives providing a summary of activities at each school, and a copy of visitation reports to the attendance specialists on a monthly or biweekly basis were provided.

The contract provided for an ASAP Precinct 7 payroll of \$209,486 for the school year 1996-97. (The contract did not actually take effect until September 16, 1996, which was the 20th student day of the 1996-97 school year.) The District provided the funding with the expectation that increased Average Daily Attendance (ADA) funding from the state would result in no net cost, in fact a profit, for the district. In this report, the following research questions are addressed:

1. What was the attendance rate in the ASAP schools in 1993-94 through 1996-97?
2. What additional revenues from the state were generated from attendance rate changes in the ASAP schools (looking at attendance rate differences from 1994-95 to 1996-97 and their revenue impact)?
3. Did the deputies visit the homes of the absentees and what was the result of the visits?
4. What other activities beyond those required under the contract did the ASAP personnel conduct for HISD?
5. What were the principals' perceptions of program effects and recommendations for change?

Findings

- The overall attendance rate in the Precinct 7 middle schools went from 91.0% in 1994-95 (the year before broad program implementation) to

92.3% in 1995-96 and 93.6% in 1996-97. From 1994-95 to 1996-97, the attendance rate went up in five of the six schools. The attendance rate declined by 2% in the sixth school.

- The program generated estimated revenues of \$372,163, which exceeded the program cost of \$209,486.
- According to records maintained by the constable, the deputies made 91.8% of the requested visits. These data were verified by a survey of principals in which two of the three principals responding indicated that all requested visits were made, and one indicated 90% were made.
- Of the 17,143 visits attempted, the deputies reported that 5.7% were the wrong address. Referrals to the attendance clerk (recommendations either for referrals to the attendance specialist or social services) were made for 15.8% of the completed visits.
- Over a three-month period for which school-level records were available, visits were made on 51% of the days (averaging across schools).
- The deputies provided numerous additional services for the schools. For example, the deputies provided an extra police presence at and near the schools. They patrolled the school neighborhood at dismissal on a daily basis. When there were rumors of a gang fight after school, additional deputies assisted in patrolling the neighborhood.
- All four principals responding to the survey felt the program improved attendance. Three of the four gave unconditional support for program continuance. The other suggested more active court activity if the program were to be continued.

- For visits to student homes in the hours 6-10 p.m., there needs to be law enforcement involvement. These hours are attractive for visiting in that they allow visits with families in which the parent(s)/guardian(s) work during the day.
- The improved attendance in these schools is the result of a team effort involving the schools, attendance specialists, ASAP personnel, other law enforcement personnel, social service agencies, and the courts. The increased cooperation between ASAP and the attendance specialists should be applauded. Interagency cooperation is essential to the success of any attendance improvement program. In particular, all parties would like to see easier court access.

Recommendations

1. As the program appeared to generate a profit, it should be continued for the year 1997-98.
2. The schools should reduce the number of days on which no absentees are reported to the deputies.
3. The schools and Precinct 7 deputies should work together to reduce the percentage of "not at home" and "bad address" absences reported by the deputies, and increase the percentage of days on which visits are made.
4. Recordkeeping in the ASAP office should be improved to allow for determination of the success of the efforts contained in Recommendations 2 and 3.
5. HISD Central Office and District Offices should facilitate cooperation among the schools, the attendance specialists, ASAP personnel, other law enforcement personnel, social service agencies, and the courts to enhance attendance improvement efforts.

ABSENT STUDENT ASSISTANCE PROGRAM PRECINCT 7 1996-97

Purpose: *Evaluation of the Absent Student Assistance Program (ASAP) in Precinct 7.*

Design: *Descriptive.*

Population, Sample: *All students in the six middle schools are included in the attendance figures. All six principals received a Principal survey and four completed it. The sergeant and deputies of ASAP, school attendance clerks, a principal, and others provided background via interviews.*

Methods: *Texas Education Agency (TEA) attendance data for 1993-94 through 1995-96 and Schools Administrative Student Information (SASI) attendance data for 1996-97 were used to calculate program impact. Precinct 7 summary reports were used to look at the implementation of the program. A principal survey helped determine the schools' view of the program.*

Findings: *The estimated revenues of \$372,163 exceeded the program cost of \$209,486. The deputies completed approximately 92% of the requested visits. In addition, there were a significant number of days in which either no visits were requested or results were not recorded (49% in the three months for which school-level data were available). The principals recommended that the program to continue.*

Conclusions: *Based on the change in attendance rates, the program should continue. However, given the concern over the number of days that no lists were furnished, the schools and deputies need to work together to ensure daily visits to the parent(s)/guardian(s) of the absent students. There should be a coordinated effort among the school, ASAP personnel, attendance specialists, the judicial system, and social service agencies to improve school attendance in these six schools.*

Introduction

Program Description

The Absent Student Assistance Program (ASAP) began in 1993-94 as a partnership between Harris County Precinct 6 Constable Victor Treviño and Jackson and Marshall Middle Schools to reduce unexcused absences. In 1994-95, the program was expanded to six additional middle schools (Deady, Edison, Fleming, Hartman, McReynolds, and E.O. Smith) in Precinct 6. In addition, there was a change in the program from being strictly volunteer on the Constable's part to having nine positions funded by the Houston Independent School District (HISD), with a paid deputy assigned to each of the eight schools and a sergeant who oversaw the entire program. In spring, 1995, the ASAP program was expanded to two middle schools in Precinct 7, Attucks and Thomas. Then, in fall 1995,

four additional middle schools in Precinct 7 were added: Cullen, Dowling, Ryan, and Woodson. By 1996-97, ASAP in Precinct 6 was also in four high schools: Austin, Davis, Milby, and Wheatley. The Precinct 6 program included a sergeant, nine deputies, and a clerk. The Precinct 7 program included a sergeant, six deputies, and a clerk. This evaluation shall focus on the program in Precinct 7. (The Precinct 6 program was evaluated in 1994-95.)

The schools provided the deputies with lists of absent students and their addresses daily. The deputies then visited the homes that evening, with the homes of Friday's absentees visited on the following Monday along with the Monday absentees (officers worked a half-day Friday consisting primarily of patrolling the neighborhood around the schools and catching up on paperwork). For each student, the deputy informed the parent(s)/guardian(s) of the ab-

sence, determined the type of absence (excused, questionable, social services needed, no one at home, or bad address), and assisted the family as appropriate. In the case of either a questionable absence or no one at home, notice was left of the state laws applicable to attendance, including potential penalties for lack of attendance.

The type of absence was provided to the school in a conference the following school day between the school (usually the attendance clerk) and the deputy. If reasons for the absence were determined during the deputy's visit to the home, these were also provided to the school.

The school then followed up on the deputy's report, particularly with respect to a questionable absence or wrong address. With a questionable absence, the school contacted the parent(s)/guardian(s) by phone; when the absence was still questionable, the case was referred often to the assistant principal. With a wrong address, the school requested documentation from the student that it was the correct address and, if none was forthcoming, referred the incident to the attendance specialist.

If the student failed to improve his/her attendance, the student's case was referred by the school to the HISD attendance specialist. When no other action proved successful, the attendance specialist took the case to court. The attendance specialists could use the constable's office's files on the home visits in court. In addition, the attendance specialists met occasionally with the deputies to discuss cases.

There appeared to be an agreement in place by the end of school on the reporting of the constable visits. In addition to the daily oral report to the school, a weekly written report to the school, a monthly report to the Department of Student Retention Initiatives providing a summary of activities at each school, and a copy of visitation reports to the attendance specialists on a monthly or biweekly basis were to be provided. There was increased information flow during 1996-97 between the constable's office and the attendance specialists, including at least four meetings between the groups.

This program operated in 1996-97 as the result of two interlocal cooperation agreements between Harris County and the Houston Independent School District (due to the policy of Commissioner's Court at the time, contracts during 1996 were only extended to the end of the year, requiring the second contract). In this agreement, the only stated responsibilities of the deputies, sergeant and clerk were that they work on

the ASAP program for the 32 hours for which they were being paid. The district's check on the program was its ability to terminate the contract without cause with 30 days written notice.

Program Goals

The primary goal of the program at these schools was to improve attendance in the schools. It was so indicated by each principal, ASAP personnel, and the board item recommending the program.

Other goals of the program were:

- Increased achievement of students as a result of attending more regularly.
- A spirit of cooperation between the schools, law enforcement, and parents in meeting the needs of children.

Program Funding and Source

The contract provided for an ASAP Precinct 7 payroll of \$209,486 for the 1996-97 school year. The District provided the funding with the expectation that increased average daily attendance (ADA) funding from the state would result in no net cost, but rather a profit, for the district.

State and Local Legislation and District Policies and Procedures Impacting Attendance: 1996-97

Section 25.085 of the Texas Education Code (West, 1996) mandated that, unless a child was at least 17 years of age and had been issued a high school equivalency certificate or had been specifically exempted in §25.086 of the code (this included provision for private school education, certain handicapping conditions, expulsions, etc.), every child in the state who was as much as six years of age, or who is less than seven years of age and had previously been enrolled in first grade, and who had not completed the academic year in which his 17th birthday occurred was required to attend the public schools in the district of his residence or some other district to which he legally transferred. Section 25.092 indicated that the student must attend 90% of class days to earn class credit. Section 25.093 indicated that, if a student had the number of absences spelled out in §51.03 of the Family Code (3 or more unexcused absences in a 4-week period or 10 or more unexcused absences in a six-month period), his parents/guardians were guilty of a Class C misdemeanor, and §25.094 indicated that the student was guilty as well. For each unexcused absence after the district sent a warning letter, the parent was guilty of a Class C misdemeanor and as

such could be fined up to \$500 (§12.23 of the Penal Code, West, 1994). Half of the funds collected from these fines were to be paid to the local school district. Upon finding a student guilty, a justice or municipal court judge may require the student to do one or more of the following (§54.021 of the Family Code): attend a preparatory class for the high school equivalency examination; attend a special program that the court determines to be in the child's best interests, including an alcohol and drug abuse program; attend along with one's parent/guardian/managing conservator a class for at-risk students; complete reasonable community service requirements; have one's driver's license suspended; attend school without unexcused absences; or attend tutorial sessions in academic subjects.

In order to assist schools in eliminating truancy, the City of Houston initiated a daytime curfew. This allowed all law enforcement officials with city ticket books to write tickets to students violating the curfew law.

HISD Administrative Procedures (HISD, 1997) restated in §730.100 the state's Compulsory Attendance Law. Section 730.120 stated that it was the responsibility of the principal to see that an Attendance Referral was made to the attendance specialist on any student who had a questionable attendance record. The district's referral procedures in force for 1996-97 (HISD, 1996) stated that a referral to the attendance specialist should be made in the following cases: three consecutive absences if the school does not know why the student is absent or if the school questions the validity of the reason given for the absence; a pattern of irregular attendance (i.e., absent Mondays and Fridays); and before withdrawing a student for whereabouts unknown. If all efforts to improve the attendance of students not of compulsory school age fail, a request for withdrawal should be made.

Review of Literature

A common thread in nearly all of the successful attendance improvement programs is the cooperation among all agencies involved, including the schools, courts, law enforcement, and social service agencies. The *Manual To Combat Truancy* (Departments of Education and Justice, 1996) cites many such programs. This manual proposes that a successful program should include the following five components: involve parents in all truancy prevention activities; ensure that students face firm sanctions for

truancy; create meaningful incentives for parental responsibility; establish ongoing truancy prevention programs in school; and involve local law enforcement in truancy reduction efforts.

Police agencies have been involved in a number of different ways. For example, several California police departments in concert with the school districts have begun periodic sweeps of locations where students who are truant are known to congregate (Sweetwater Union High School District, 1982). When juveniles are arrested for other reasons, their school attendance is often investigated (Bage, 1989). Improved attendance can be included as a requirement of probation.

Another justification for police involvement in truancy reduction efforts is the amount of crime perpetrated by truant students. In addition to increasing attendance rates, the California police sweeps led to a significant reduction in juvenile crime. One study reported that 65% of all daytime burglaries were committed by truants (California Department of Justice, 1982).

One measure of the success of a program is others' efforts to duplicate it. Within HISD, the program begun in Harris County Precinct 6 in two schools has been expanded to 18 schools in two precincts.

Purpose of the Evaluation Report

The following research questions were addressed:

1. What was the attendance rate in the ASAP schools in 1993-94 through 1996-97?
2. What additional revenues from the state were generated from attendance rate changes in the ASAP schools (looking at attendance rate differences from 1994-95 to 1996-97 and their revenue impact)?
3. Did the deputies visit the homes of the absentees and what was the result of the visits?
4. What other activities beyond those required under the contract did the ASAP personnel conduct for HISD?
5. What were the principals' perceptions of program effects and recommendations for change?

Methods

Data Collection

Data obtained for this report reflect information available as of July 14, 1997. The HISD Department of Data Management provided attendance rates for

Table 1: Attendance in ASAP Schools 1993-94 Through 1996-97 and Estimated Revenue

School	1996-97 Average Membership	Attendance Rates (%)				Savings (1994-95 to 1996-97)
		1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	
Attucks	976	88.4	90.6	94.3	93.7	\$80,935
Cullen	838	92.9	92.6	90.9	90.9	(\$38,108)
Ryan	893	93.3	92.9	94.5	97.0	\$97,940
Woodson	599	90.7	90.7	92.2	92.4	\$27,240
Dowling	1,325	92.0	92.2	91.4	94.6	\$85,065
Thomas	742	88.0	85.6	90.0	91.6	\$119,091
Total	5,373	91.0	91.0	92.3	93.6	\$372,163

the schools for 1996-97. TEA attendance figures for HISD schools were used for the previous three years. Precinct 7 staff provided the number of absences, number of visits attempted, number of bad addresses, days worked, days visited, and number of referrals. Referrals were made to the schools either in the case of repeated questionable absences (recommendations that the school file referrals to the attendance specialist) or for social services (a relatively small share of the total). The principal parties in the program (principals, attendance clerks, and the ASAP sergeants and deputies) were interviewed to gain a sense of how the program was carried out. Principals also participated in a follow-up survey. The researcher accompanied a deputy on patrol to see what occurred on visits to the home.

Participants

The sergeant and all the deputies in the ASAP program and others provided program information.

One principal and three attendance clerks participated in a structured interview. Four of the six principals in schools in Precinct 7's ASAP program participated in a follow-up survey.

Results

What was the attendance rate in the ASAP schools in 1993-94 through 1996-97?

Attendance rate was stable at 91.0% during the two years prior to the program. The overall attendance rate in the Precinct 7 middle schools (see Table 1) went from 91.0% in 1994-95 (the year before broad program implementation) to 92.3% in 1995-96 and

93.6% in 1996-97. From 1994-95 to 1996-97, the attendance rate went up in five of the six schools. In the other middle school, the attendance rate declined by 2%.

What additional revenues from the state were generated from attendance rate changes in the ASAP schools?

Using 1994-95 and 1996-97 attendance rates along with 1996-97 membership and the HISD Adjusted Basic Allotment (ABA) of \$2,675 as the basis for calculating revenue generated from the program, revenue generated from the program during 1996-97 is estimated to be \$372,163. Using 1993-94 attendance figures for Attucks and Thomas, which began the program during 1994-95, increases the estimated generated revenues to \$381,964. Giving credit only for gains made from 1995-96 to 1996-97 would reduce the revenues to \$192,437. However, that penalizes ASAP for gains made during the program's first year. As students in various special programs including compensatory education, bilingual education, career and technical education, gifted and talented programs, special education programs, and who are pregnant are eligible for additional funds, this estimated revenue should actually be an undercount.

Did the deputies visit the homes of the absentees and what was the result of the visits?

According to Precinct 7 ASAP's year end summary data, there were 18,672 absences reported to ASAP. Of this number, visits were attempted at 17,143 homes (91.8%). There were 971 bad ad-

dressess, 5.7% of the attempted visits. The percentage of visits where no one was at home was not recorded. While an examination of the monthly reports suggests that these totals may have left out as much as two months of data, the percentages would probably not have been significantly impacted.

Table 2: Days Schools Reported Absences to ASAP During Three 1996-97 Months

School	Month		
	Sept. 16 to Oct. 18	April 1 to April 30	May 1 to May 30
Attucks	17	9	9
Cullen	15	6	1
Ryan	17	6	3
Woodson	14	13	6
Dowling	18	15	13
Thomas	19	10	4
Working Days	24	20	20

An examination of the records for three months shows that there were many days on which visits were either not made to the homes of students in the different schools, or the visits were not recorded (see Table 2). For example, in the three months for which school level data were available, the percentage of working days upon which visits were made ranged among the schools from 58 to 79% in the first month, 30 to 65% in the second month, and 5 to 65% in the final month. For these three months, the overall fraction of days in which visits were made was 51%.

Following the interviews with the principal and attendance clerks, a survey was sent to the principals of the six schools. Four of the six principals returned the survey. Three principals indicated the percentage of the visits requested by the school that the deputy was able to make. Two indicated 100% and the third indicated 90%.

Principals were also asked if they had a procedure in place if the attendance clerk was absent. All schools but one had someone listed to substitute. The remaining school indicated that the attendance clerk just doubled up upon returning.

As a result of the visits, referrals were made in 2,715 cases (referrals are made when it is determined that the student needs social services or the case should be referred by the school to an attendance specialist), 15.8% of the completed visits.

When the researcher accompanied a deputy on visits, he observed many of the situations which the

ASAP deputies had described in previous conversations. There were wrong addresses, students who should not have been visited because they were suspended or elsewhere in the building but not recorded as present, students who were sick, students who were taking care of sick relatives, parents who were unaware of their child's absence, and a variety of other excuses (missed the bus, clothes were locked in a utility room, etc.)

What other activities beyond those required under the contract did the ASAP personnel conduct for HISD?

The deputies provided an extra police presence at the schools. They patrolled the school neighborhood daily after school. They occasionally ran radar at dismissal time to slow down the traffic. They helped with security at special school meetings. When there were rumors of a gang fight after school, one or more additional deputies patrolled the neighborhood. There appeared to be an excellent working relationship between the HISD Police Department and the Constable's deputies in these cases. Truant students were picked up (truancy referrals came from many sources, including homeowners, businesses, the schools, etc.).

What were the principals' perceptions of program effects and recommendations for change?

All indicated that they thought the program improved the attendance rate. Other comments included:

- It heightens the awareness of school attendance by others in the attendance zone.
- It closes loophole that allows students to unofficially drop out.
- The ASAP program has helped parents become aware of their student's absences because the truant officer makes home visits. The parent is limited in his or her ability to say that they are not aware because the officer informs them.
- The program has encouraged parents to communicate more with the attendance clerk on the days that their children will not attend school. Truant officers are not sent to homes if the parent calls the attendance clerk and informs him or her of the reason for their child's absence.
- It cuts down on juvenile violence because the juveniles are in school.

When asked how others perceived the program, three of the four principals indicated approval from students, parents, teachers, and administrators. The other principal indicated approval from teachers and principals and, with regard to parents and students, stated "The concerned parents love the program, but the unconcerned parents complain. The program is fearful to most students, but the others don't care."

Recommendations included the following:

- Have the deputies write citations after the fifth absence.
- Reports should be turned in daily and more action taken when parents can not and do not make students come to school.
- Two principals made recommendations regarding court action, as follow: (1) "In an effort to improve the attendance process, HISD should consider hiring a judge to expedite court time for nonattendance," and (2) "Suggestion: More court action taken. Please implement after excessive absences and warning notices have been sent to parents, that the parent is taken to court and filed on."

Attendance specialists, attendance clerks and the ASAP officers share this frustration with the court system. It should be noted that some justices are doing their utmost to see that the court cases are handled in an expeditious manner. However, given the courts' case loads, it is often difficult for them to handle cases quickly.

Discussion

Based on attendance results, the ASAP program had success at increasing the attendance rate. The overall attendance rate in the Precinct 7 middle schools went from 91.0% in 1994-95 (the year before broad program implementation) to 92.3% in 1995-96 and 93.6% in 1996-97. From 1994-95 to 1996-97, the attendance rate went up in five of the six schools. The program generated estimated revenues of \$372,163, which exceeded the program cost of \$209,486.

The success of the ASAP program was limited by the number of absentees whose parent(s)/guardian(s) were visited by the deputies. The deputies did not attempt visits at more than 8% of the homes. The percentage of bad addresses is much lower than that seen two years ago (21%) in a previous ASAP evaluation. However, the number of days on which absent

students' homes were not visited (over a 3-month period for which school-level records were available, visits were made on 51% of the days, if averaged across schools) and lack of data on the number of visits in which no one was at home is a concern.

For visits to student homes in the hours 6-10 p.m., there needs to be law enforcement involvement. These hours are attractive for visiting in that they allow visits with families where the parent(s)/guardian(s) work during the day.

All four principals responding to the survey felt the program improved attendance. Three of the four gave unconditional support for program continuance. The other suggested more active court activity if the program were to be continued.

The improved attendance in these schools is the result of a team effort involving the schools, attendance specialists, ASAP personnel, other law enforcement personnel, social service agencies, and the courts. The increased cooperation between ASAP and the attendance specialists should be applauded. Interagency cooperation is essential to the success of any attendance improvement program. In particular, all parties would like to see easier court access.

Recommendations

1. As the program appeared to generate a profit, it should be continued for the year 1997-98.
2. The schools should reduce the number of days where no absentees are reported to the deputies.
3. The schools and Precinct 7 deputies should work together to reduce the percentage of "not at home" and "bad address" absences reported by the deputies, and increase the percentage of days on which visits are made.
4. Recordkeeping in the ASAP office should be improved to allow for determination of the success of the efforts contained in Recommendations two and three.
5. HISD Central Office and District Offices should facilitate cooperation among the schools, the attendance specialists, ASAP personnel, other law enforcement personnel, social service agencies, and the courts to enhance attendance improvement efforts.

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